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LATENT AND MANIFEST FUNCTION IN THE
THEORY AND RESEARCH OF BRONISLAW MALINOWSKI

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Bronislaw Malinowski might well be termed the godfather of modern functionalism. He, more than anyone else, articulated theoretically and applied empirically a type of thinking about social organization which had been used by many of his predecessors but without a systematic investigation of its nature and implications. Malinowski's approach, however, is not just functional but, like all functional studies, involves structural elements which exist in functional relationship to one another. Thus, when Malinowski says that his two types of analysis are the institutional and functional, it is equivalent to saying that his approach is structural-functional. Functions are, in fact, an integral part of structural analysis.

Malinowski uses institutions rather loosely as the organized systems of purposeful activities. Their components are: charter, personnel, norms, material apparatus, activities, and function. (1, p. 52) Cooperative and organized activities thus grow out of personnel following the norms of their specific positions and using the material apparatus at their disposal. The function of such activities is to be distinguished from the charter in that, while the charter is the explicit traditional or new purpose to be achieved, function is the "integral result of organized activities." (1, p. 53)

Summarizing Malinowski's purely theoretical statements of his functional approach, we find the basic structural isolate to be the institution. Function emerges as one aspect of that structure. It is the objective result of the organized purposeful activities of the institution as these results are tied to the needs, that is, to the maintenance conditions or functional prerequisites, of the total social system in general or to parts of the system in particular. Certain basic needs are worked out toward the fulfillment of which men develop direct organized collective responses or institutions. Such direct institutional responses, in turn, require for their very organized existence the fulfillment of certain other emergent derived conditions or needs. These needs emergent at the level of collective organization are called instrumental, symbolic, and integrative. In response to the specific kinds of instrumental, symbolic, and integrative needs, systems of economics, social control, education, religion, magic, knowledge, etc., have developed universally. (2, p. 942)

The purpose of this paper is not just to review Malinowski's theory and empirical research, but to see how the related concepts of function and dysfunction, manifest and latent function, fit into Malinowski's theory and can be significantly illustrated by his ethnographic research.

Toward this objective, let us look first at the meaning of function and dysfunction. Function broadly conceived, is the objective consequence of the concrete application of a social process, pattern, status-role, group, or institution. (5, p. 50) The first step in isolating function, then, is to isolate the structural parts which are in functional relationship, that is, which have unilateral or interdependent objective consequences. Involved in the ascertainment of the objective consequences of a particular cultural item is the implication that some other cultural item will be affected. That is, the consequences of one cultural item can only be evaluated in terms of its effects upon another. Hence it is logically and conceptually impossible to think of simply "objective consequences" without also limiting the range of effects and asking the question of "consequences for what group, pattern, institution, status-role?"

This involves the further judgement as to the positive or negative, i. e., the functional or dysfunctional, nature of the effects of one cultural item upon another. One can conceivably state the objective consequences without making such a judgment, but most functional studies do involve this type of evaluation. That they do, however, does not imply that there is any acceptance of the ultimate validity of the cultural items and their positive and negative consequences

or that what is functional for one item may not be dysfunctional to another. For instance, it is probable that a system of pre-marital and post-marital marriage counseling clinics would be dysfunctional to the divorce pattern, while equally functional to marital success. Weber's discussion of the immanent functional tendency of the charismatic authority system to become routinized and thus move into the traditional or rational-legal system and the tendency of the rational-legal system to move into the other two types, illustrates the same thing. (6, p. 363) Functional and dysfunctional are highly relative terms, the validity of their use depending largely upon one's perspective. That is, just because some particular cultural item is considered dysfunctional to an existing system does not mean that at the same time it cannot be functional to an emerging new system, or that it cannot be at once both functional and dysfunctional to the same system.

In summary of this point, we can say that functional analysis may be the discovery of unilateral causal effects of one part of culture upon another. More frequently, however, functionalism is couched in terms of "interdependent effects." The emphasis here is upon the ways in which the parts of a total system, whether this system be a group, institution or society, inter-influence, mutually affect, and inter-depend among, each other. Consideration of these effects also usually involves a judgment of their positive and negative nature seen in terms of the maintenance conditions of the item affected.

With this as a background, we are in a position to turn to Robert Merton's use of latent and manifest function. (5, pp. 61ff) Manifest functions are those objective consequences, both positive and negative, which are intended, purposive. Latent functions, on the other hand, are those objective consequences which are unintended but which are discovered by the observer. Both of these involve objective consequences and are to be distinguished from "avowed purposes." That is, subjective purposes are not function, though the objective consequences of such purposive action, if the consequences are those intended, are manifest functions. It follows that the avowed purpose of a cultural item may not actually result in or may not be subject to evaluation. This is particularly true when the relationship between the pattern and consequence is a non-empirical, imputed, and thus transcendental one. This does not mean, however, that such a cultural pattern cannot have functions of a latent, unintended sort, which explain why it persists in the presence of an irrationally or nonrationally imputed consequence.

Applying these concepts to the theory and research of Malinowski, we note that they fit nicely. For instance, it has been pointed out previously that Malinowski, in his purely theoretical works, distinguishes clearly between "charter," and "function." Charter is the explicitly stated aim of the institution; function is the "integral results of organized activity." By integral results of organized activity, Malinowski means the objective consequences of the institution in the maintenance of the integral or whole society. What difference does the institution make? What prerequisites for a going society does it meet? Malinowski's strictly theoretical formulation of his functional position is limited mostly to stating the functions of universally-found institutional complexes in meeting these basic and derived functional prerequisites.

In his empirical studies, several distinctive things appear. First of all, Malinowski points up the necessity of distinguishing between the negative and positive effects of one item on another, though his major emphasis is upon the latter. In the light of Merton's severe criticism of Malinowski for his exposition of an "ideologically conservative" functionalism which tends to find only positive functions for every cultural item and to regard both the functions and the items indispensable as they exist, (5, pp. 38ff) it may seem strange that we would say that Malinowski recognizes the necessity of distinguishing between the positive and negative (functional and dysfunctional) effects of one item on another. We believe, however, that Merton and others who have similarly criticized Malinowski overlook such statements as the following from *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*:

In my opinion magic has exercised a profound positive function in organising enterprise, in inspiring hope and confidence in the individual. Side by side with this, magical belief has obviously developed an attitude which exerts disturbing and subversive influences,

especially in witchcraft and black magic. In the history of culture, every phenomenon, I think, has got its constructive and disintegrative sides, its organising functions and its influences which point towards dissolution and decay. Human cultures do not merely grow and develop. They also decompose, die or collapse. Functional anthropology is not magic; it is not a chartered optimism or whitewashing of culture. (4, p. 240)

It is true, of course, that most of Malinowski's ethnographic works and theoretical generalizations emphasize positive functional values of the items studied to the exclusion of their negative dysfunctional values and are open to justifiable criticism on that score. The fact remains, however, that Malinowski shows that he is aware of the dysfunctional as well as functional aspects of cultural items.

Secondly, Malinowski's functionalism in his empirical works not only includes analysis of broad institutional complexes but also that of the functional contributions of particular patterns, systems of patterns, and statuses, i. e., inter-institutional functions. Thirdly, he implicitly introduces a distinction between the ostensible or manifest function and the un-noticed or latent function. Fourthly, one can find traces of a distinction between the imputed manifest function and genuine manifest functions. Let us proceed to illustrate these concepts in terms of Malinowski's research.

In one place, Malinowski points out that the Trobriand Islanders have a rudimentary matter-of-fact body of knowledge which represents the beginnings of science. They have a body of rules and conceptions

based on experience and derived from it by logical inference, embodied in material achievements and in a fixed form of tradition and carried on by some sort of social organization ... (3, p. 17)

Included in this practical knowledge are the experimentally verified principles of buoyancy, leverage, equilibrium, etc., employed in making a canoe, (3, p. 17) the nature of soils and plants, and a fair knowledge of meteorological rhythms and sign. (4, p. 76f)

In contrast with this type of knowledge and activity, magic is not directed toward influencing nature so as to produce desired empirical ends. Magic is oriented to empirical ends, but not by way of natural forces. It is a pragmatic scheme of definitions developing from the powerful effect of experiences lived through in which man received a revelation of his autonomous power to achieve the desired end apart from or in cooperation with the forces of nature.

Why does magic arise and what is its function? It arises in response to the gaps and impotence of empirical knowledge. It appears "where there is an important human activity which is at the same time dangerous, subject to chance, and not completely mastered by technical means." (4, p. 217)

The basic function of magic is to offer man some active attitude toward these unpredictable aspects of his environment in the absence of adequate technological knowledge. It gives him faith in his own ability to cope with these aspects and in many cases creates confidence and group unity which makes it possible for things to be done which would otherwise be impossible. Magic, then, has the positive function of integrating group action, sustaining group morale and unity, and reassuring personal fears by offering some active and positive method of coping with what empirically is beyond the control and understanding of man. On the other hand, certain types of magic are negatively functional, i. e., dysfunctional in their disturbing, subversive impact on morale, unity, and group actions.

From Malinowski's analysis, we can conclude that magic has no genuinely objective, manifest functions, for its avowed empirical ends are related to the means used in a transcendental, non-observable manner. The only genuinely objective functions which Malinowski locates for magic are latent ones, fulfilling psychological and social needs of which the individuals are not conscious but the presence of which, along with the avowed subjective purpose and "imputed" manifest functions, explain the persistence of this cultural system.

In connection with this last statement, we should like to point out that Merton, in his treatment of manifest and latent function, overlooks the fact

that, while there may be no manifest functions as objective, verifiable consequences of one item for the maintenance needs of the other given items, the "imputed" or "spurious" manifest functions may be of great importance in explaining the persistence of some cultural items. In other words, Malinowski makes it clear that, though the Trobriand Islanders would accept an empirically established principle if it were available before they would use magical technique, the fact remains that they had a qualified belief and faith in the efficacy of magic. They thus not only used magic for a given purpose but had faith that, if used properly, the magical techniques objectively produced the intended results. In an *ex post facto* judgment, proper use was imputedly verified by the manifest appearance of the stated purpose of the technique. Erroneously imputed or else nonevaluable manifest functions may thus be a factor in explaining the persistence of a cultural item, as well as latent function and subjectively intended purpose. Sociologists and anthropologists well know by now that the reality which is effective in meaningful human action is that which is subjectively defined as real. If "imputed" manifest functions are thought to result from purposive actions, they are as real explanatory factors of action occurrence and pattern persistence as the objectively evident manifest and latent functions.

To illustrate this point further, let us look at the *kamkokola* ceremony. This was one of the three or four principal ceremonies of the Trobriand gardening cycle and came when the yam gardens of the Trobrianders were cleared. The *kamkokola* was a structure erected on the four corners of every yam garden plot. The most important of these structures stood at the magical corner of the garden: the special corner where many of the other ceremonies were performed and where the spirits were housed. (4, p. 128)

The *kamkokola* and the *kamkokola* ceremony are found to have several functions. First of all, the natives realized that the structure was of positive empirical value because the higher the taytu vines, the better they developed underground. This involved both an explicit purpose and a manifest function: an intended, verifiable, objective consequence. Secondly, there was the mystical feeling of the natives that somehow the height and strength and aesthetic quality of the poles had a stimulating effect on the young plants. This involved an explicit purpose but also an "imputed" or "spurious" manifest function: the native believed this relationship to hold and the purpose of the poles to have the intended consequence when the yield was good. It was, however, a nonempirical, nonverifiable imputation. Thirdly, the magical ceremony was the last decorative touch given to the magical corner before the vine supports were raised. It was thus inaugurative to the erection of the vine supports. Fourthly, it was of definite aesthetic value. The inaugurative and aesthetic functions of this ceremony were latent functions, perceived during lengthy field investigation by Malinowski into the whole gardening complex. (4, p. 121ff)

The *urigubu* gift from the brother to his sister's family consisted of a certain portion of his best yams from each crop. Here the manifest function, if there is any, is not isolated by Malinowski. It was not simply an economic transaction, but had the latent function of recognizing in a tangible fashion the moral duty of the male to the matrilineal line being perpetuated through the children of his sister. It was also a major element in marriage stability, a channel of levying tribute by chiefs, and expressed the real constitution of the Trobriand kinship grouping in which there was a compromise between the patrilineal household and matrilineal filiation. (4, pp. 176ff)

Malinowski sees religion growing up about the more vital events of life: birth, providence, death, adulthood, etc. The basic difference between magic and religion is that in religion the rites and ceremonies are not directed toward an empirical end but are ends in themselves. (3, pp. 20ff) In other words, being largely expressive in nature, there are no explicit purposes, no imputed manifest functions, and no genuine manifest functions in religious ceremonies connected with these vital events. There are, however, latent functions connected with each of these and explaining their persistence.

Had one the time, it would be possible to carry this analysis on into Malinowski's functional treatment of language, of the *bwayma* or central storehouse, the land tenure system, agricultural products, *kula*, law, myth, and many

other patterns and systems of the Trobrianders. In some of these, it is impossible to isolate any manifest function in Malinowski's ethnographic reports. This is to be expected both because he was not working explicitly in terms of this frame of reference and because articulated subjective purposes are not attached to all deeply ingrained normative patterns and systems, hence there is no possibility of checking the rationalized purpose against the objective consequences. This is true even, though to a lesser degree, in our own culture and other mobile cultures like it, where extensive rationalization is a prominent feature. The significance of Malinowski's functionalism is that it demonstrates that purpose and function are not the same, that it is possible to distinguish the objective consequences which are intended from those that are hidden and latent, that subjectively imputed or spurious manifest functions can be distinguished from genuinely objective manifest functions, and that the principal contribution that sociologists and anthropologists can make in the functional study of cultural items is hunting for the positive and negative unilateral and interdependent relationships of a latent variety existing between specified elements of social structure within specified ranges of influence.

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